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Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Consumer  
Service

Program Aid  
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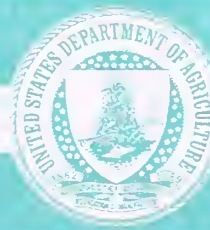
# Facts About the Food Stamp Program

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This is an equal opportunity program. If you believe that you have been the victim of discrimination in your efforts to participate in the Food Stamp Program because of your race, color, national origin, age, sex, handicap, religion, or political beliefs, write immediately to: Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service, 3101 Park Center Dr., Alexandria, Va. 22302.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
**FOOD COUPONS**

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To file a complaint, write the Secretary of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC, 20250, or call 1-800-245-6340 (voice) or (202) 720-1127 (TDD). USDA is an equal employment opportunity employer.

Revised August 1997



# Facts About the Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program helps low-income people buy the food they need for good health. You may be able to get food stamps if you:

- ☐ work for low wages,
- ☐ are unemployed or work part time,
- ☐ receive welfare or other public assistance payments,
- ☐ are elderly or disabled and live on a small income, or
- ☐ are homeless.

State public assistance agencies run the program through their local offices. The following basic rules apply in most States, but a few States have different rules.

The amount of food stamps you can get is based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Thrifty Food Plan, which is an estimate of how much it costs to buy food to prepare nutritious, low-cost meals for your household. This estimate is changed every year to keep pace with food prices.

In the Food Stamp Program, a household is normally a group of people who live together and buy food and prepare meals together. If your household passes the program's eligibility tests, the amount of food stamps you get will depend on the number of people in your household and on how much monthly income is left after certain expenses (deductions) are subtracted.

For most households, food stamps are only part of their food budgets; they must spend some of their own cash along with their food stamps in order to buy enough food for a month.

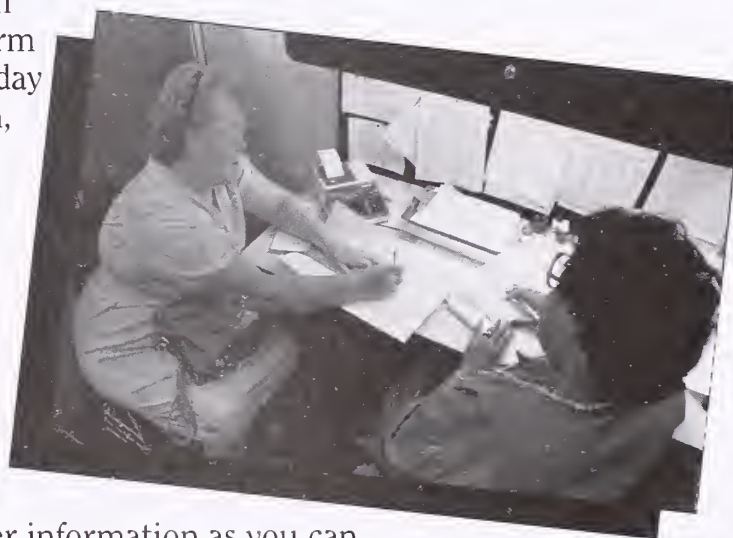
For more information or to apply for food stamps, you should contact your local food stamp office. It is probably listed under "Human Resources," "Social Services," or "Food Stamps" in the State or local government pages of the telephone directory.

## Applying for Food Stamps

The food stamp office will give you an application form on the same day you ask for one. You may ask for it in person, over the phone, or by mail; or someone else may get one for you.

The office will accept the form on the same day you turn it in, even if they cannot interview you on that day.

Fill in your name, address, telephone number, and as much other information as you can on the form, and sign it. Give or send the form to the office as soon as possible. A food stamp worker can help you fill out the rest of the form during your interview.



**YOU MUST ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS COMPLETELY AND HONESTLY. IF YOU FAIL TO DO SO, YOU CAN BE REMOVED FROM THE PROGRAM, FINED, PUT IN PRISON, OR ALL THREE.**

If you qualify for food stamps, you will get them no later than 30 days from the date the office got your application.

If your household has little or no money and needs help right away, let the food stamp office know—you may be able to get food stamps within 7 days.

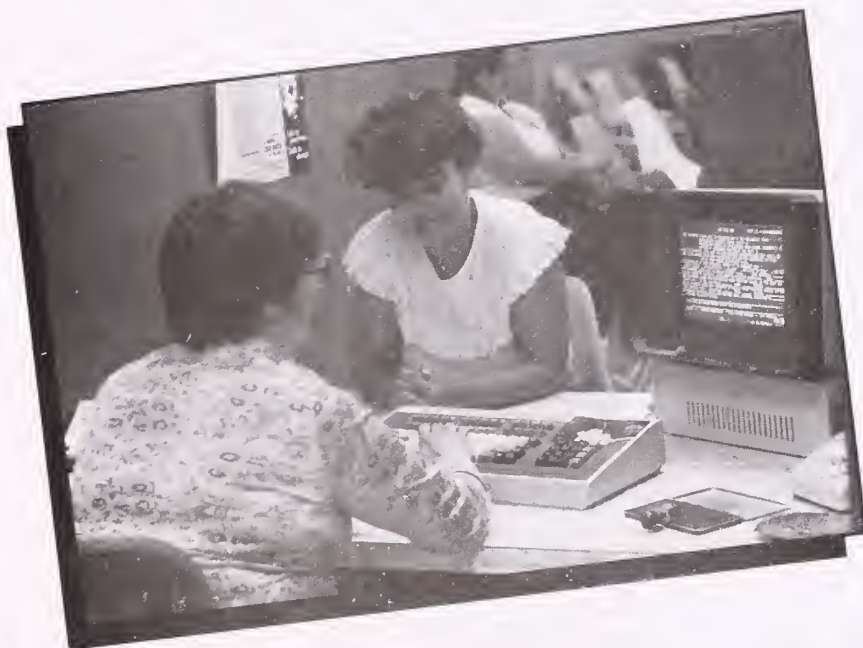
If you and everyone you live with are applying for or getting Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, you may apply for food stamps in your Social Security district office, except in California (where people who receive SSI benefits get cash instead of food stamps).

Households that are applying for public assistance and, in some locations, State or local general assistance can apply for food stamps at the same time.

Other households must apply for food stamps through their local food stamp or welfare office.

After you have turned in your application, the food stamp office will contact you to set up an interview to go over your application.

A food stamp worker will explain the program rules and help you complete any parts of the application that you have not filled out. The worker will also ask you for proof of certain information you have given. Ask the worker to explain anything you don't understand. It's important that you understand the rules.



## Meeting Eligibility Rules and Providing Proof That You Are Eligible

Listed below are some of the basic rules and the kinds of proof you may need during your interview. Your case may be completed faster if you bring the proof with you to the interview.

If you have trouble getting papers (documents) or information you need, the worker may be able to help you. If the papers are not easy to get, you may give the name of someone, such as your employer, who can confirm your statements.

FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF HOMETOWN	
110 Main Street, Hometown, Anystate 54321	
STATEMENT	
John A. Doe	3/31/97
Savings	\$111.24
Beginning	575.18
Deposits	<u>585.00</u>
Withdrawals	
TOTAL	<u>101.42</u>

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**Citizenship and Alien Status:** Most people who are not U.S. citizens are not eligible for the program. There are a few exceptions for refugees, asylees, aliens whose deportation has been withheld, military personnel, and some aliens legally admitted for permanent residence who have 40 qualifying quarters of social security coverage. Generally, these are aliens who have worked in this country for at least 10 years. Even if some members of your household are not eligible, those who are may be able to get food stamps.





**Social Security Numbers:** You will have to provide a Social Security number for every household member, including children. If any household member does not have a Social Security number, he or she will have to apply for one. If you are otherwise eligible for food stamps, you can get them for a short time while you are waiting for your Social Security number.

**Work Rules:** With certain exceptions, able-bodied adults between 16 and 60 years of age must register for work, accept an offer of suitable work, and take part in an employment and training program to which they are referred by the food stamp office.

Generally, able-bodied adults aged 18 to 50 who do not have children and are not pregnant can only get food stamps for 3 months in a 3-year period unless they are working or participating in a work or workfare program. There are a few exceptions.

**Students:** Most able-bodied students ages 18 through 49 who are enrolled in college or other institutions of higher education at least half time are not eligible for food stamps. However, students may be able to get food stamps if otherwise eligible if they:

- ☐ work at least 20 hours a week;
- ☐ are taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 6;
- ☐ are taking care of a dependent household member over the age of 5 but under 12 and do not have adequate child care to enable them to attend school and work a minimum of 20 hours, or to take part in a State or federally financed work study program; or
- ☐ are assigned to or placed in a college or certain other schools through:
  - a program under the Job Training Partnership Act,
  - a program under Section 236 of the Trade Act of 1974,
  - an employment and training program under the Food Stamp Act, or
  - an employment and training program operated by a State or local government.



- ☐ get public assistance benefits under a Title IV-A program;
- ☐ take part in a State or federally financed work study program;

Also, a single parent enrolled full time in college and taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 12 can get food stamps if otherwise eligible.

**Persons on Strike:** Households with a person who is on strike because of a labor dispute are not eligible unless they were eligible the day before the strike and continue to be eligible at the time of application. Eligible households cannot get more food stamps just because the striking member is getting less income.

**Resources:** Under food stamp rules, resources—such as bank accounts, cash, real estate, personal property, vehicles, and so forth—are considered in determining whether a household is eligible to get food stamps. Some resources are counted toward the allowable limit and some are not. The food stamp worker will explain which are counted. All households may have up to \$2,000 worth of countable resources and still be eligible. Households may have up to \$3,000 and still be eligible if at least one member is age 60 or older.



The resources of people who get public assistance, SSI, and, in some locations, general assistance are not counted toward the limit.

Some resources that **will not** be counted are:

- ☐ your home and surrounding lot,
- ☐ household goods and personal belongings, and
- ☐ life insurance policies.

Examples of resources that **will** be counted are:

- ☐ cash and money in checking and savings accounts;
- ☐ stocks and bonds; and
- ☐ land and buildings, other than your home and lot, that do not produce income.

(Proof: Bank books, bank statements, and other documents.)

Licensed vehicles are handled as follows:

- ☐ A vehicle is not counted as a resource if it is:
  - used over 50 percent of the time for producing income for the household,
  - annually producing income consistent with its fair market value,
  - necessary for long-distance travel for work (other than daily commute),
  - used as the household's home,
  - necessary to transport a physically disabled household member, or
  - needed to carry most of the household's fuel or water.
- ☐ For the following vehicles, the **fair market value** is determined and any amount **over \$4,650** is a resource that will be counted:
  - one vehicle per household; and
  - any vehicle used for employment, training or education to prepare



for employment, or to look for employment to meet the food stamp employment and training rules.

- ☐ For all other vehicles, the **fair market value over \$4,650 or the equity value, whichever is more**, is a resource that will be counted. (Equity value is the market value of the vehicle, less the amount the household owes on it.)

**Income:** Under food stamp rules, almost all types of income are counted to determine if a household is eligible. Most households must have income at or below certain dollar limits before and after deductions are allowed. However, households in which all members are getting public assistance or SSI (or, in some locations, general assistance) do not have to meet the income eligibility tests.

(Proof: You must provide proof of the income of all household members. Examples of proof include latest pay stubs or a statement from your employer; and benefit letters from Social Security, Veterans Administration, unemployment compensation, or pensions.)

**Deductions:** After adding all of your household's countable income, the food stamp worker will subtract certain deductions. The income after deductions must fall below a certain dollar amount for your household to get food stamps. This dollar amount will depend on the number of people in your household. The following deductions are allowed for all households:

- ☐ standard deduction;
- ☐ 20 percent of earned income;
- ☐ actual costs of dependent care (There is a dollar limit on the amount of the deduction. Depen-

dent care includes care for children and disabled adults if this care is needed so that a household member can work, look for a job, or get training or education leading to a job.);

- ☐ legally owed child-support payments;
- ☐ shelter expenses that are more than half of your income (There is a dollar limit on the amount of shelter expenses that may be deducted unless there is an elderly or disabled member. If there is an elderly or disabled member, the dollar limit does not apply.); and
- ☐ medical expenses over \$35 a month for household members who are age 60 or older or receiving certain disability payments (Medical costs are deductible only if they are not covered by insurance, a government program, or some other source.).

(Proof: Bills or records of payment for the following:

- ☐ dependent-care costs, such as a babysitter, day-care center, or attendant for a disabled adult;
- ☐ child-support payments, such as a court order and cancelled checks;
- ☐ rent or mortgage;
- ☐ insurance on the structure (but not the contents) of a home;
- ☐ telephone, electricity, gas, oil, water, sewerage, garbage collection, and installation costs for utilities; and
- ☐ medical expenses and proof of any reimbursement, such as an insurance policy or statement from an insurance company or agency paying these bills.)

## Finding Out If You Qualify

After your interview, the food stamp office will send you a notice.

If you do not qualify for food stamps, the notice will explain why.

If you do qualify, the notice will explain how many food stamps you will get. It will also tell you how many months you can get food stamps before you must reapply.

If you think your application has been wrongly denied or that you have not gotten the correct amount of food stamps, you should tell the office. If they do not agree, you must ask them to have your case reviewed by a fair hearing official. For more information about fair hearings, see the section entitled Your Rights on page 8.

## Receiving Your Food Stamps

If the office finds that you are eligible, you will be able to get your food stamps no later than 30 days from the date you first



applied, unless you qualify for faster service. If you have no income (or very little income) for the month and you need help right away, you may qualify for 7-day service.

Food stamp benefits are issued to households in different ways in different places. The local food stamp worker will explain how food stamps will be issued to you. Eligible households will be given an identification card that they must show when picking up their food stamps. In some areas, this will be a photo ID.

If you are told to pick up your food stamps but you can't, tell the food stamp worker. You may name someone else to pick them up for you.



## Spending Your Food Stamps

You can spend food stamps like cash at most stores that sell food. The cashier may ask you to show your food stamp ID.

Food stamps can only be used for food and for plants and seeds to grow food for your household to eat.

Sales tax cannot be charged on items bought with food stamps.

Food stamps cannot be used to buy:

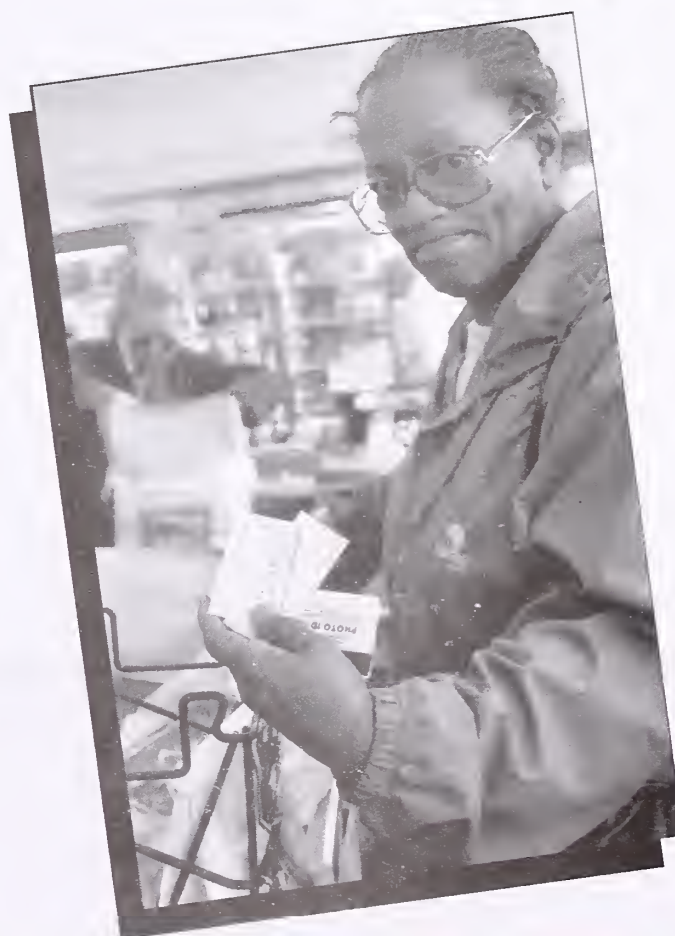
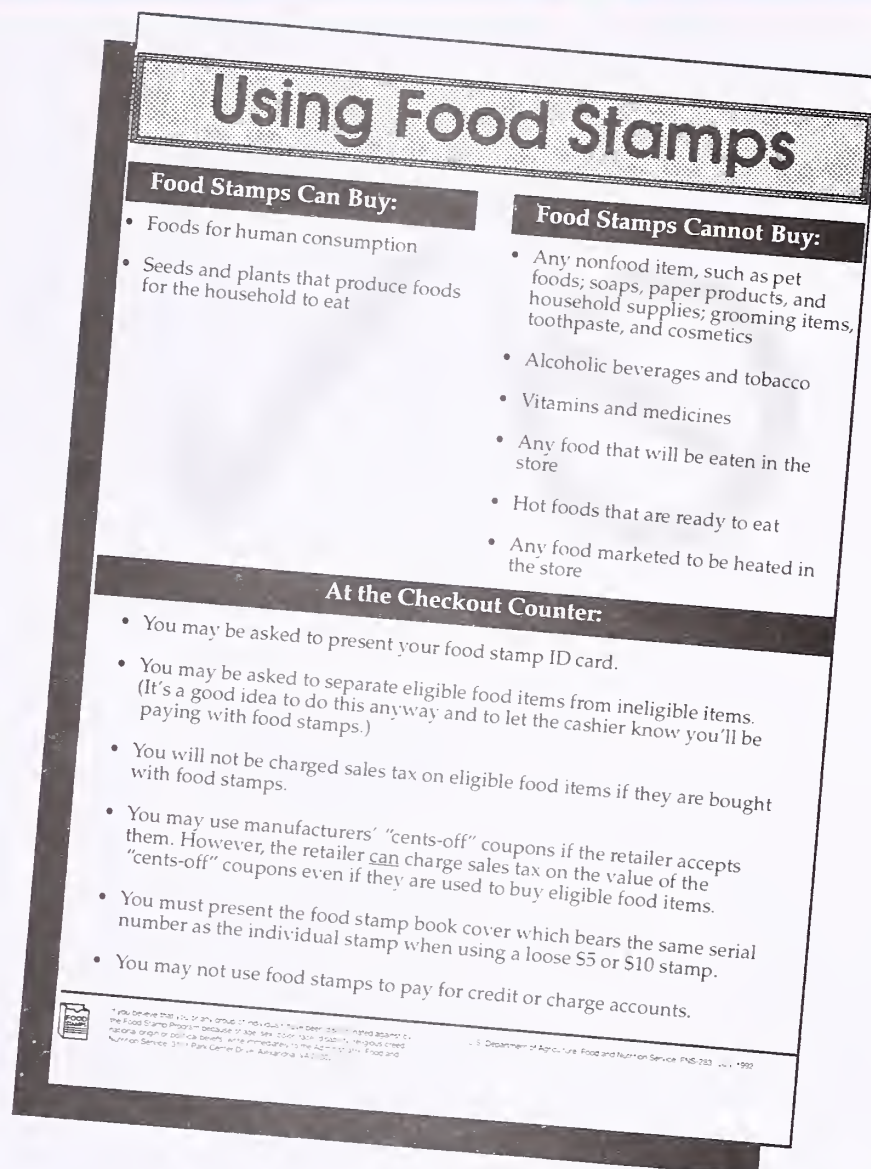
- ☐ any nonfood item, such as pet foods; soaps, paper products, and household supplies; grooming items, toothpaste, and cosmetics
- ☐ alcoholic beverages and tobacco
- ☐ vitamins and medicines
- ☐ any food that will be eaten in the store
- ☐ hot foods that are ready to eat
- ☐ any food marketed to be heated in the store

If you are issued food stamps in booklets and your food stamps get loose from the booklet cover, keep the cover. Stores cannot accept any food stamps without a booklet cover except for the \$1 kind. If the cashier owes you change from a food stamp purchase, up to 99 cents of it can be in coins. Change in even dollar amounts will be given to you in food stamps.

## Reporting on Your Household Circumstances

Some households are required to report on their household circumstances every month. Other households are required to report changes in household circumstances when they become known. You may report changes by calling the food stamp office. However, it is better to write down the change and mail it to the office.

If you are eligible for food stamps, you will be told what information to report and when to report.



**IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT YOU REPORT CHANGES, SO THAT YOUR HOUSEHOLD GETS THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD STAMPS. IF YOU GET ANY EXTRA FOOD STAMPS BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT REPORTED THE RIGHT INFORMATION, YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY BACK THE VALUE OF THE EXTRA FOOD STAMPS.**

## **Your Rights**

You have the right to:

- ☐ have your application accepted on the same day that you contact the food stamp office in person;
- ☐ have an adult who knows your situation apply for you if you cannot get to the food stamp office;
- ☐ get your food stamps within 30 days after you apply if you do qualify for them;
- ☐ get food stamps within 7 days if you are in immediate need and qualify for faster service;
- ☐ not be discriminated against because you are elderly or because of sex, race, color, disability, religious creed, national origin, or political beliefs;
- ☐ be told in advance if the food stamp office is going to reduce or end your benefits during your certification period because of a change in your situation that you did not report in writing;
- ☐ look at your own case file and a copy of the Food Stamp Program rules; and
- ☐ have a fair hearing if you don't think the rules were applied correctly in your case. At a fair hearing, you may explain to a hearing official why you don't agree with what the food stamp office has done.

You can ask the food stamp office for a fair hearing in writing, in person, or over the phone. The office will give you information about the hearing rules in your State.

You can ask a friend or relative or anyone else to help you prepare for the hearing and go to the hearing with you.

In some cases, you can continue to get your food stamps without a change while you are waiting for the hearing decision.

If the official decides the food stamp office is right, you will have to repay the value of any food stamps you did not have a right to get. If the hearing official decides you are right, you will continue to get or begin to get the correct amount of food stamps. If the hearing official decides you are right and you did not get continued benefits, the amount of any food stamps you had a right to get will be given to you.

## **Your Responsibilities**

- ☐ When you apply for food stamps, answer all questions completely and honestly. Sign your name to certify, under penalty of perjury, that all your answers are true.
- ☐ Provide proof that you are eligible.
- ☐ Promptly report changes in household circumstances to the food stamp office.
- ☐ Do not put your money or possessions in someone else's name in order to be able to get food stamps.
- ☐ Do not make changes on any food stamp cards or documents.
- ☐ Do not sell, trade, or give away your food stamps, or any food stamp cards or documents.
- ☐ Use food stamps only to buy eligible items.



## FOOD STAMP RIGHTS

You have the right to:

- Receive an application when you ask for it.
- Turn in your application the same day you receive it.
- Receive your food stamps (or be notified that you are not eligible for the program) within 30 days after you turn in your application.
- Receive food stamps within a few days if you are eligible and have little or no money.
- Have a fair hearing if you disagree with any action taken on your case.



*If you believe that you or any group of individuals have been discriminated against by the Food Stamp Program because of age, sex, color, race, disability, religious creed, national origin or political beliefs, write immediately to the Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service, 3101 Park Center Drive, Alexandria, Virginia 22302.*

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, FNS-183, Issued December 1978.

Slightly Revised September 1992.

PEOPLE WHO BREAK FOOD STAMP RULES MAY BE DISQUALIFIED FROM THE PROGRAM, FINED, IMPRISONED, OR ALL THREE.

### Toll-Free Hotline

If you wish to report any misuse, fraud, waste, or abuse of food stamps, you can use this toll-free hotline number: 1-800-424-9121. If you are in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, the number is (202) 690-1622.

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